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Book Review: *Fractured Rebellion*

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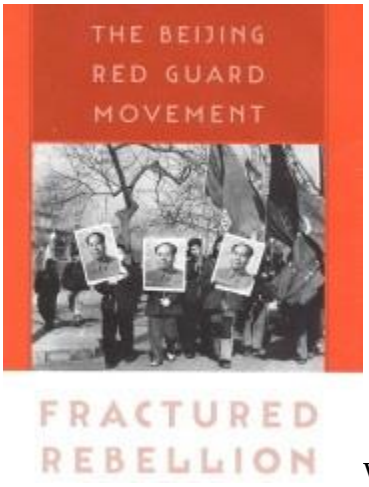

Walder, Andrew G. *Fractured Rebellion: The Beijing Red Guard Movement*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009. xii, 400 pp. $42.00 (cloth).

By Amy O'Keefe

In this groundbreaking book, Andrew Walder creates an orderly account of the events, discussions, and political currents that comprised the student movement in Beijing during the first two years of China's Cultural Revolution. With meticulous attention to sequencing, he comprehends and brings meaning to a whirlwind of events often described as a vindictive political free-for-all, but which he shows, instead, to have been a structured series of rivalries.

Walder sets himself apart from the mainstream of the political sociology field, which he describes as focused on mobilization. He argues that the true puzzle of the Red Guard movement does not lie in the causes and mechanisms of students' political mobilization, but rather what circumstances prompted each factional division. According to Walder, Michel Oksenberg and Ezra Vogel developed the idea that students with connections to the power structure were divided against radicals who sought to take it down, and this inaccurate oversimplification became an underlying assumption of other Cultural Revolution analyses, including Walder's earlier work (1978, 1996). In *Fractured Rebellion*, Walder characterizes students' divisions as instead based on their choices at each of a series of political crossroads, beginning with their responses when the work teams took over the Cultural Revolution at Beijing universities in June 1966.

In pursuing this thesis at the level of minute detail, Walder begins to fulfill the mandate of his 2002 *Journal of Asian Studies* article, in which he argues that political decisions and factional identities "can only be understood by tracing the sequence of events through time" (463). In *Fractured Rebellion*, Walder maps events through the use of a vast body of Red Guard materials, primarily those published by the Center for Chinese Research Materials and the Chinese University of Hong Kong. These include published speeches, personal interviews, and student posters and newspapers, which sometimes published transcripts of conversations between

students and central authorities. Walder's meticulous construction of a timeline is a methodology with persuasive power and continuing utility; Walder uses it again in a piece co-written with Dong Guoqiang and published in May 2011, which similarly counters a social conflict interpretation of Cultural Revolution factionalism, this time through close examination of the student movement in Nanjing.

In *Fractured Rebellion*, Walder begins his account of Beijing's student movement by showing that work teams took various stances vis-à-vis existing political leadership. He thus discounts the assumption that work teams were protective of incumbent power structures. Struggles between students and work teams were more about the extent of work team authority than political stance, and student groups' relationships with the work teams were what determined factional divides after the work teams were removed. A new set of divisions was forged starting at the end of 1966, when the Party core shifted the focus of the Cultural Revolution to restructuring local government in the manner of Shanghai, creating Cultural Revolution committees at the municipal and school levels. Where before the winning factions had worked in parallel to each other, each attacking the ministry above it on the ladder of authority, now victorious Red Guard groups vying for power had to choose which factions within the ministries to support as revolutionary heirs of power, and which to condemn. Their essentially arbitrary choices led to a new wave of cross-campus alliances and rivalries.

Readers should be warned that *Fractured Rebellion* contains a dizzying array of names, organizations, and alliances. The book's Glossary of Names is helpful. Entries are brief, and include the information most needed, namely the person's institutional affiliation and stance on major issues or divisions. Story lines within this dense work could be easier to follow if Walder had invested certain characters with more personality, but he may have legitimately felt that his space was best spent detailing events. The amount of detail Walder provides in the book's many mini-narratives renders his writing dense, but the investment of time and focus required to comprehend it will pay off for readers seeking to understand Red Guard student movement events and debates.

While never denying the tragedy or horror of the Red Guard movement, *Fractured Rebellion* avoids the knotty question of blame, asking not how this could happen but how *did* this movement unfold? Incremental answers to this question lead Walder and his readers back to the broader question of the nature of the movement. Walder affirms what Susan Shirk (1982) and Xu Youyu (1999) have indicated: that the Red Guard movement, in each step of its development, was essentially defensive, less about winning than not losing. In addition to sending home this point with clarity and the weight of copious evidence, Walder deftly outlines how sponsorship of student groups by the CCRG and other leaders caused the student movement to reflect, and at times amplify, political undulations in the central government. In a logical and memorable way, Walder's powerful scholarship gives readers a feel for the variety and balance of forces at play at Red Guards' various crossroads. In short, for a flavor of Beijing Red Guard movement, as much as for a strong structural analysis of the various forces at work in that movement, Andrew Walder's *Fractured Rebellion* is the definitive text.

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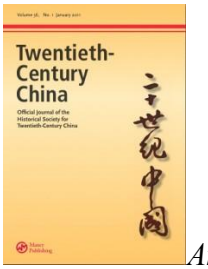

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